The Use of Games: For Vocabulary Presentation and Revision

By Agnieszka Uberman

Vocabulary acquisition is increasingly viewed as crucial to language acquisition. However, there is much disagreement as to the effectiveness of different approaches for presenting vocabulary items. Moreover, learning vocabulary is often perceived as a tedious and laborious process.

In this article I would like to examine some traditional techniques and compare them with the use of language games for vocabulary presentation and revision, in order to determine whether they are more successful in presenting and revising vocabulary than other methods.

From my teaching experience I have noticed how enthusiastic students are about practising language by means of games. I believe games are not only fun but help students learn without a conscious analysis or understanding of the learning process while they acquire communicative competence as second language users.

Vocabulary Teaching Techniques

There are numerous techniques concerned with vocabulary presentation. However, there are a few things that have to be remembered irrespective of the way new lexical items are presented. If teachers want students to remember new vocabulary, it needs to be learnt in context, practised, and then revised to prevent students from forgetting. Teachers must make sure students have understood the new words, which will be remembered better if introduced in a "memorable way" (Hubbard et. al. 1983:50). Bearing all this in mind, teachers have to remember to employ a variety of techniques for new vocabulary presentation and revision.

Gairns and Redman (1986) suggest the following types of vocabulary presentation techniques:

1. *Visual techniques.* These pertain to visual memory, which is considered especially helpful with vocabulary retention. Learners remember better the material that has been presented by means of visual aids (Zebrowska 1975:452). Visual techniques lend themselves well to presenting concrete items of vocabulary-nouns; many are also helpful in conveying meanings of verbs and adjectives. They help students associate presented material in a meaningful way and incorporate it into their system of language values.
2. *Verbal explanation.* This pertains to the use of illustrative situations, synonymy, opposites, scales (Gairns and Redman 1986:74), definition (Nation 1990:58) and categories (Allen and Valette 1972:116).
3. *Use of dictionaries.* Using a dictionary is another technique of finding out meanings of unfamiliar words and expressions. Students can make use of a variety of dictionaries: bilingual, monolingual, pictorial, thesauri, and the like. As French Allen perceives them,

dictionaries are "passports to independence," and using them is one of the student-centered learning activities (1983:83).

Using Games

The advantages of using games. Many experienced textbook and methodology manuals writers have argued that games are not just time-filling activities but have a great educational value. W. R. Lee holds that most language games make learners use the language instead of thinking about learning the correct forms (1979:2). He also says that games should be treated as central not peripheral to the foreign language teaching programme. A similar opinion is expressed by Richard-Amato, who believes games to be fun but warns against overlooking their pedagogical value, particularly in foreign language teaching. There are many advantages of using games. "Games can lower anxiety, thus making the acquisition of input more likely" (Richard-Amato 1988:147). They are highly motivating and entertaining, and they can give shy students more opportunity to express their opinions and feelings (Hansen 1994:118). They also enable learners to acquire new experiences within a foreign language which are not always possible during a typical lesson. Furthermore, to quote Richard-Amato, they, "add diversion to the regular classroom activities," break the ice, "[but also] they are used to introduce new ideas" (1988:147). In the easy, relaxed atmosphere which is created by using games, students remember things faster and better (Wierus and Wierus 1994:218). S. M. Silvers says many teachers are enthusiastic about using games as "a teaching device," yet they often perceive games as mere time-fillers, "a break from the monotony of drilling" or frivolous activities. He also claims that many teachers often overlook the fact that in a relaxed atmosphere, real learning takes place, and students use the language they have been exposed to and have practised earlier (1982:29). Further support comes from Zdybiewska, who believes games to be a good way of practising language, for they provide a model of what learners will use the language for in real life in the future (1994:6).

Games encourage, entertain, teach, and promote fluency. If not for any of these reasons, they should be used just because they help students see beauty in a foreign language and not just problems that at times seem overwhelming.

Choosing appropriate games. There are many factors to consider while discussing games, one of which is appropriacy. Teachers should be very careful about choosing games if they want to make them profitable for the learning process. If games are to bring desired results, they must correspond to either the student's level, or age, or to the material that is to be introduced or practised. Not all games are appropriate for all students irrespective of their age (Siek-Piskozub 1994:37). Different age groups require various topics, materials, and modes of games. For example, children benefit most from games which require moving around, imitating a model, competing between groups and the like (Siek-Piskozub 1994:38). Furthermore, structural games that practise or reinforce a certain grammatical aspect of language have to relate to students' abilities and prior knowledge. Games become difficult when the task or the topic is unsuitable or outside the student's experience.

Another factor influencing the choice of a game is its length and the time necessary for its completion. Many games have a time limit, but according to Siek-Piskozub, the teacher can either allocate more or less time depending on the students' level, the number of people in a group, or the knowledge of the rules of a game etc. (1994:43).

When to use games. Games are often used as short warm-up activities or when there is some time left at the end of a lesson. Yet, as Lee observes, a game "should not be regarded as a marginal activity filling in odd moments when the teacher and class have nothing better to do" (1979:3). Games ought to be at the heart of teaching foreign languages. Rixon suggests that games be used at all stages of the lesson, provided that they are suitable and carefully chosen. At different stages of the lesson, the teacher's aims connected with a game may vary:

1. Presentation. Provide a good model making its meaning clear;
2. Controlled practise. Elicit good imitation of new language and appropriate responses;
3. Communicative prastice. Give students a chance to use the language (1981:70).

Games also lend themselves well to revision exercises helping learners recall material in a pleasant, entertaining way. All authors referred to in this article agree that even if games resulted only in noise and entertained students, they are still worth paying attention to and implementing in the classroom since they motivate learners, promote communicative competence, and generate fluency. However, can they be more successful for presentation and revision than other techniques? The following part of this article is an attempt at finding the answer to this question.

The Use of Games for Presenting and Revising Vocabulary

Vocabulary presentation. After the teacher chooses what items to teach, Haycraft suggests following certain guidelines. These include teaching the vocabulary "in spoken form first" to prevent students from pronouncing the words in the form they are written, placing the new items in context, and revising them. A number of techniques can be adopted to present new vocabulary items. The presentation of new vocabulary is classified according to verbal and visual techniques following Gairns and Redman's classification. Among visual techniques are flashcards, photographs and pictures, wall charts, blackboard drawings, word pictures, incongruous visuals, realia, mime, and gesture. Students can label pictures or objects or perform an action. Verbal techniques consist of using illustrative situations, descriptions, synonyms and antonyms, scales, and, as described by Nation (1990:58), using various forms of definition: definition by demonstration (visual definition), definition by abstraction, contextual definitions, and definition by translation. Allen and Valette (1972:116) also suggest the use of categories-organising words into sets, subclasses and subcategories often aided by visual presentation. Those learners who are more autonomous can make use of other techniques such as asking others to explain the meaning of an unknown item, guessing from context or using either of a variety of dictionaries.

I shall now proceed to present practical examples of games I have used for vocabulary introduction and revision.

Description of the groups. For the purpose of vocabulary presentation, I chose two groups of third form students. With one of them I used a presentation game and with the other translation and context guessing. In both groups, students' abilities varied-ranging from those whose command of English was very good, able to communicate easily using a wide range of vocabulary and grammatical structures, and those who found it difficult to communicate. The choice of lexical items to be introduced

After covering the first conditional and time clauses in the textbook, I decided to present students with a set of idioms relating to bodily parts-mainly those connected with the head (taken from *The Penguin Dictionary of English Idioms*). The choice of these expressions was determined by students' requests to learn colloquial expressions to describe people's moods, behavior, etc. Moreover, in one of the exercises the authors of the textbook called for examples of expressions which contain parts of the body. For the purpose of the lesson I adapted Gear and Gear's "Vocabulary Picture-Puzzle" from *the English Teaching Forum* (1988:41). Students were to work out the meanings of sixteen idiomatic expressions. All of them have Polish equivalents, which made it easier for students to remember them.

Description of Vocabulary Picture-puzzle

To prepare the puzzle, I cut two equal-sized pieces of cardboard paper into rectangles. The selected idioms were written onto the rectangles in the puzzle-pieces board and their definitions on the game board. On the reverse side of the puzzle-pieces board, I glued colorful photographs of landscapes and then cut the puzzle-pieces board into individual pieces, each with an idiom on it. The important thing was the distribution of the idioms and their definitions on the boards. The definitions were placed in the same horizontal row opposite to the idioms so that when put together face to face each idiom faced its definition.

Puzzle Pieces Board

(Figure) The idioms and their definitions were the following (all taken from *The Penguin Dictionary of English Idioms* p.77):

1. to be soft in the head: *foolish, not very intelligent;*
2. to have one's hair stand on end: *to be terrified;*
3. to be two-faced: *to agree with a person to his face but disagree with him behind his back;*
4. to make a face: *to make a grimace which may express disgust, anger;*
5. to be all eyes: *to be very attentive;*
6. to be an eye-opener: *to be a revelation;*
7. to be nosy: *to be inquisitive, to ask too many questions;*
8. to be led by the nose: *to be completely dominated by, totally influenced by;*
9. long ears: *an inquisitive person who is always asking too many questions;*
10. to be all ears: *to listen very attentively;*
11. to be wet behind the ears: *to be naive, inexperienced;*
12. a loose mouth: *an indiscrete person;*

13. one's lips are sealed: *to be obliged to keep a secret;*
14. to have a sweet tooth: *to have a liking for sweet food, sugar, honey, ice cream, etc.;*
15. to grind one's teeth: *to express one's fury;*
16. to hold one's tongue: *to say nothing, to be discrete;*

The task for students. Work out the puzzle by matching the idioms and their definitions. First, put puzzle-pieces on the desk with the word facing up. Take one and match the idiom to the definition. Having done that, place the puzzle-piece, word-side-up, in the chosen rectangle. When you have used up all the pieces, turn them over. If they form a picture of a landscape, the choices are correct. If not, rearrange the picture and check the idiom-definition correspondences.

The game objectives. To work out the puzzle, students had to match idioms with their definitions. The objective of the game was for each pair to cooperate in completing the activity successfully in order to expand their vocabulary with, in this case, colloquial expressions.

All students were active and enjoyed the activity. Some of their comments were as follows: "Very interesting and motivating" "Learning can be a lot of fun" etc.

Students also had to find the appropriate matches in the shortest time possible to beat other participating groups. The element of competition among the groups made them concentrate and think intensively.

Translation activity. The other group of students had to work out the meanings of the idioms by means of translation. Unlike the previously described group, they did not know the definitions. The expressions were listed on the board, and students tried to guess their proper meanings giving different options. My role was to direct them to those that were appropriate. Students translated the idioms into Polish and endeavored to find similar or corresponding expressions in their mother tongue. Unlike the game used for the purpose of idiom introduction, this activity did not require the preparation of any aids. Fewer learners participated actively or enthusiastically in this lesson and most did not show great interest in the activity.

Administering the test. In order to find out which group acquired new vocabulary better, I designed a short test, for both groups containing a translation into English and a game. This allowed learners to activate their memory with the type of activity they had been exposed to in the presentation.

The Test Checking the Acquisition of Newly-introduced Reading Vocabulary

I. Match the definitions of the idioms with the pictures and write which idiom is depicted and described:

1. to be inexperienced
2. to listen very attentively
3. to be terrified

4. to be dominated by someone
5. to be attentive
6. to be insincere, dishonest

The proper answers are the following:

1. *d* ., to be wet behind the ears
2. *a* ., to be all ears
3. *e* ., to have one's hair stand on end
4. *f* ., to be led by the nose
5. *b* ., to be all eyes
6. *c* ., to be two-faced.

II. Translate into English (the translated sentences should be the following):

1. He is soft in the head.
2. She is two-faced, always criticizes me behind my back.
3. Mark has a sweet tooth, so he is not too slim.
4. Will you hold your tongue if I tell you something?
5. Why are you such a loose mouth?
6. Don't be nosy! This is none of your business.

The results of the test. The following table shows how many students did better at the game, how many at the translation and how many did equally well at one and the other:

Analysis of the results. Group I received an average mark of 3.9 as compared to 3.4 obtained by group II. In other words, the group which had learned vocabulary through games performed significantly better. However, it is especially interesting and surprising that group II also received high scores for the game. Even though learners in group I had the material presented by means of translation, most students got better marks for the game.

Summing up. Even though the results of one activity can hardly lead to informative conclusions, I believe that the results suggest that the use of games for presentation of new vocabulary is very effective and enjoyable for students. Despite the fact that the preparation of a game may be time-consuming and suitable material may be hard to find, teachers should try to use them to add diversion to presentational techniques.

Revising Vocabulary

Many sources referred to in this article emphasise the importance of vocabulary revision. This process aims at helping students acquire active, productive vocabularies. Students need to practise regularly what they have learnt; otherwise, the material will fade away. Teachers can resort to many techniques for vocabulary consolidation and revision. To begin with, a choice of graphs and grids can be used. Students may give a definition of a given item to be found by other students. Multiple choice and gap filling exercises will activate the vocabulary while students

select the appropriate response. Teachers can use lists of synonyms or antonyms to be matched, sentences to be paraphrased, or just some words or expressions in context to be substituted by synonymous expressions. Doing cloze tests will show students' understanding of a passage, its organisation, and determine the choice of lexical items. Visual aids can be of great help with revision. Pictures, photographs, or drawings can facilitate the consolidation of both individual words as well as idioms, phrases and structures. There is also a large variety of word games that are "useful for practising and revising vocabulary after it has been introduced" (Haycraft 1978:50). Numerous puzzles, word squares, crosswords, etc., are useful especially for pair or group work.

I shall now present the games I have used for vocabulary revision.

Description of the group. I gave teachers a questionnaire to determine their view of using games for vocabulary teaching. In response to the questionnaire, many teachers said they often used games for vocabulary revision. Some claimed they were successful and usually more effective than other methods. To see if this is really true, I decided to use a crossword puzzle with a group of first year students.

The crossword puzzle. After completing a unit about Van Gogh, students wanted to expand their vocabulary with words connected with art. The students compiled lists of words, which they had learnt. In order to revise the vocabulary, one of the groups had to work out the crossword puzzle.

Students worked in pairs. One person in each pair was provided with part A of the crossword puzzle and the other with part B. The students' task was to fill in their part of the puzzle with the missing words known to their partner. To complete the activity, learners had to ask each other for the explanations, definitions, or examples to arrive at the appropriate answers. Only after getting the answer right could they put it down in the suitable place of their part of the crossword. Having completed the puzzle, students were supposed to find out what word was formed from the letters found in the shaded squares.

The word in shaded squares: STAINED GLASS.

Students enjoyed the activity very much and did not resort to translation at any point. They used various strategies to successfully convey the meanings of the words in question-e.g., definitions, association techniques, and examples. When everyone was ready, the answers were checked and students were asked to give examples of definitions, explanations, etc., they had used to get the missing words.

Definitions. The other group performed a similar task. Students were to define as follows:

I. Define the following words: *shade, icon, marker, fresco, perspective, hue, daub, sculptor, still life, watercolor, palette, background.*

II. Find the words these definitions describe:

1. a public show of objects

2. a variety of a colour
3. a wooden frame to hold a picture while it is being painted
4. a pale or a delicate shade of a colour
5. a picture of a wide view of country scenery
6. an instrument for painting made of sticks, stiff hair, nylon
7. a painting, drawing, or a photograph of a real person
8. a piece of work, especially art which is the best of its type or the best a person has made
9. painting, music, sculpture, and others chiefly concerned with producing beautiful rather than useful things
10. a line showing the shape (of something)
11. a person who is painted, drawn, photographed by an artist
12. a picture made with a pen, pencil, etc.

The test. To learn which group acquired and consolidated the vocabulary better, I prepared and administered a short test. One part of it was a matching exercise-students were to match a word and its definition. The other part consisted of a crossword puzzle. The learners' task was to write in the defined words and give a definition to the word that was formed of a sequence of letters in a horizontal line. All definitions were taken from *The Longman Active Study Dictionary of English.*

I. Match the definitions with the words below:

1. a public display of objects
2. the scenery or ground behind the main object
3. charming or interesting enough to be made into a picture
4. a wooden frame to hold a picture while it is being painted
5. (a picture painted with) paint mixed with water
6. a picture of a wide view of country scenery
7. a board with a curved edge and a hole for the thumb on which an artist mixes colours
8. a picture made with a pen, pencil, etc.
9. a colour
10. painting, music, sculpture, and others chiefly concerned with producing beautiful rather than useful things

A. picturesque, B. landscape, C. hue, D. exhibition, E. watercolor, F. background, G. palette, H. easel, I. fine arts, J. drawing

II. Work out the crossword puzzle and define no. 9.

1. (Figure) a thing made to be exactly like another
2. a person who is painted, drawn, photographed by an artist
3. an instrument for painting made of sticks, stiff hair, nylon
4. a variety of a colour
5. a stick of coloured wax, chalk used for writing or drawing especially on paper
6. a piece of work especially art which is the best of its type or the best a person has done
7. a pale or a delicate shade of a colour

8. a line showing the shape (of something)
9. :

The correct answers were:

I. 1,D; 2, F; 3, A; 4, H; 5, E; 6, B; 7, G; 8, J; 9, C; 10, I.

II. 1. copy, 2. model, 3. brush, 4. tone, 5. crayon, 6. masterpiece, 7. tint, 8. outline, 9. portrait: a painting, drawing of a real person.

The results of the test. The results turned out to be very good with the average mark of 4.4. The following table presents students' performance on the test with regard to its particular parts:

*Except for the spelling mistakes, which show that a student does not fully know the word (Palmberg 1986:18), both of the students would have gained an equal number of points for both parts (one student wrote "masterpiese", the other "brash").

Analysis of results. The results show that the crossword puzzle, though seemingly more difficult since it required the knowledge of words and their definitions and not mere recognition and matching, was easier for 27.4% of the learners and granted them more points for this part of the test. For the majority of the students (nearly 60%) both activities proved equally easy and out of the group of thirteen, eleven students had the highest possible score.

Summing Up

These numbers suggest that games are effective activities as a technique for vocabulary revision. Students also prefer games and puzzles to other activities. Games motivate and entertain students but also help them learn in a way which aids the retention and retrieval of the material (This is what the learners stated themselves).

However, the numbers also show that not everyone feels comfortable with games and puzzles and not everyone obtains better results.

Although one cannot overgeneralise from one game, student feedback indicates that many students may benefit from games in revision of vocabulary.

Conclusions

Recently, using games has become a popular technique exercised by many educators in the classrooms and recommended by methodologists. Many sources, including the ones quoted in this work, list the advantages of the use of games in foreign language classrooms. Yet, nowhere have I found any empirical evidence for their usefulness in vocabulary presentation and consolidation.

Though the main objectives of the games were to acquaint students with new words or phrases and help them consolidate lexical items, they also helped develop the students' communicative competence.

From the observations, I noticed that those groups of students who practised vocabulary activity with games felt more motivated and interested in what they were doing. However, the time they spent working on the words was usually slightly longer than when other techniques were used with different groups. This may suggest that more time devoted to activities leads to better results. The marks students received suggested that the fun and relaxed atmosphere accompanying the activities facilitated students' learning. But this is not the only possible explanation of such an outcome. The use of games during the lessons might have motivated students to work more on the vocabulary items on their own, so the game might have only been a good stimulus for extra work.

Although, it cannot be said that games are always better and easier to cope with for everyone, an overwhelming majority of pupils find games relaxing and motivating. Games should be an integral part of a lesson, providing the possibility of intensive practise while at the same time immensely enjoyable for both students and teachers. My research has produced some evidence which shows that games are useful and more successful than other methods of vocabulary presentation and revision. Having such evidence at hand, I wish to recommend the wide use of games with vocabulary work as a successful way of acquiring language competence.

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